Climate and climate-related hazards such as floods, storms, and droughts have served as trigger events for more than 75% of the disasters that have occurred globally over the past decade. Proportionately, these disasters affect the least developed countries most intensely, proving to be especially harmful to poverty stricken populations. In the future, a changing climate is likely to exacerbate these effects and could make development unsustainable in many places. It is necessary to develop the capacity of all countries to combat hazards so that they do not become disasters. Despite half century of concerted research and public policy practice, governments across the globe remain uncommitted to reducing society’s vulnerability to natural hazards. The escalation of disaster losses and the increasing non-governmental movements into highly hazardous areas support this assertion. Although there may be recognition of the hazards in many communities, risk reduction and vulnerability often are not salient concerns until after the disaster occurs. Residents have other issues that assume priority, and local elected officials usually do not want to dwell on the hazard vulnerability of their communities as it might hurt economic investment and growth.

While numerous research efforts have assessed various dimensions of community risk resilience, challenges remain in the development of consistent factors that can be used to qualitatively evaluate the disaster resilience of communities. This paper aims (1) to provide a conceptual framework for natural disaster resilience drawn from the global change, hazards, political ecology, ecosystems, and planning literatures, and (2) describe a candidate set of qualitative variables for assessing resilience based on the same literature. Towards this end, a qualitative meta-synthesis is considered a recent development of qualitative inquiry that offers a means of enhancing the contribution of qualitative findings to the development of more formalized knowledge. In an era of pressure toward evidence-based research, qualitative meta-synthesis is witnessing a new enthusiasm from social researchers as a distinct method from conventional literature reviews and secondary analyses. On the other hand, like all forms of empirical inquiry, research meta-synthesis can be carried out in ways that lead to more or less valid inferences about the phenomenon under study.

This meta-synthesis research (a) examined the methods employed in the syntheses of the effects of risk resilience programs and determined how closely they conformed to what is defined as best practice for research synthesis, (b) compared the inferences drawn from the resilience research literature by each synthesis with the inferences that plausibly could be made from the data they covered, and (c) determined the points of consistency across the syntheses with regard to both potentially valid and potentially invalid conclusions. Current Research findings indicate that researchers used highly divergent methods, varying in problem definitions, search strategies, inclusion criteria for individual studies, and techniques for drawing conclusions about the cumulative evidence. Findings provide the basis for a theoretically sound approach to understanding the resilience enhancing mechanisms that operate through risk communication and education. Similarities between the gains made in environmental responsible behavior and risk resilience are highlighted.